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The Florida Times-Union

Friday, March 30, 2018

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City CFO rebuffs JEA panel

By David Bauerlein
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The city's finance director refused to provide information requested this week by a special City Council committee exploring the potential sale of JEA, saying in an email that "they are on their own."

The stand-off came to light Thursday during a meeting of the

council committee that is examining the pros and cons of privatizing JEA, a study set in motion after a consultant hired by JEA issued a Feb. 14 report that the time might be right to put JEA up for sale.

The City Council Auditor's Office routinely turns to the city's finance department for information without any problems as part of the flow of information between the legislative and executive

branches of city government.

But when the council auditor's staff asked for information regarding the city's general fund debt, the auditor's office got rebuffed, according to an email exchange.

"We continue to not work on any JEA sale analysis," city Chief Financial Officer Mike Weinstein wrote in a Monday email. "They are on their own."

City Council President Anna Brosche, who formed the special committee, read the email into the record at the end of the committee's meeting on Thursday.

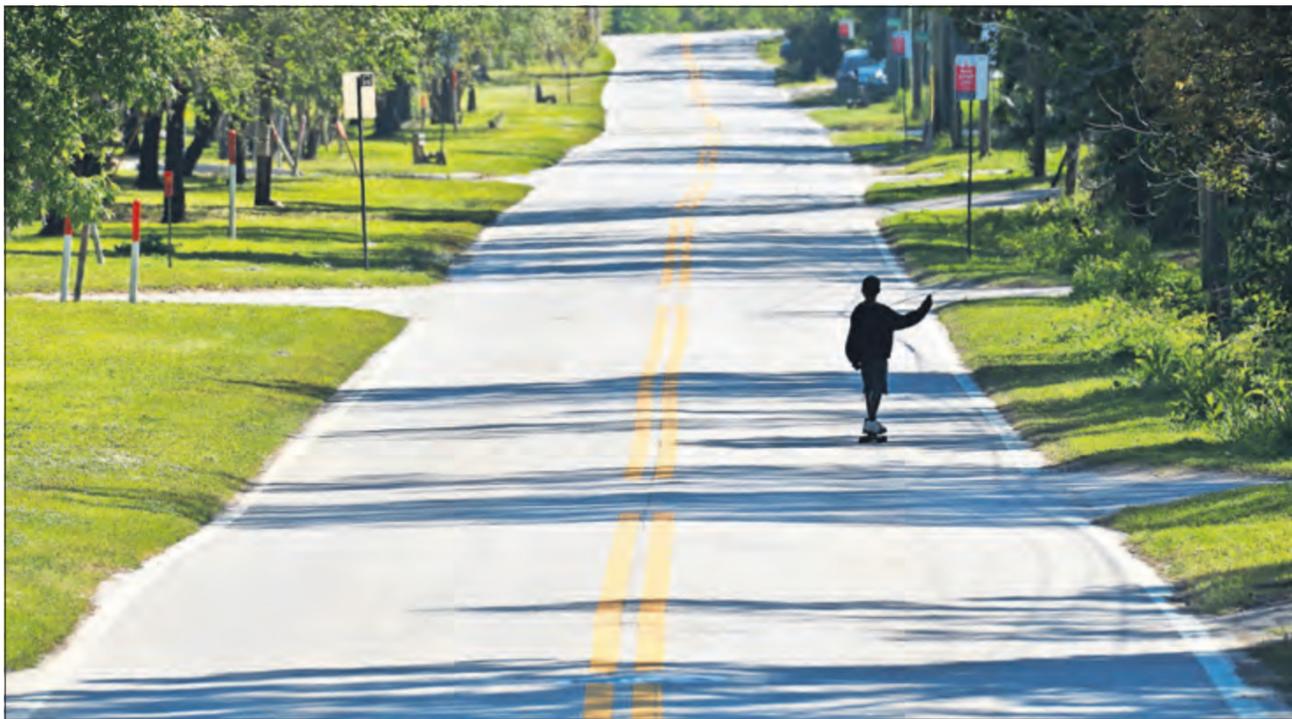
She said after the meeting that the email is a "signal that there is no intention" for the administration to work together with the City Council and "get to the truth or

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"We continue to not work on any JEA sale analysis. They are on their own."

Mike Weinstein, Chief Financial Officer

Sparking hope for progress



Planners have considered closing to cars a long stretch of McCoys Creek Boulevard, where a boy rode his skateboard near Cherokee Street this month. The pavement would become a running/biking trail for a greenway that would shut down when the street floods.

[PHOTOS BY WILL DICKEY/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]

'Emerald necklace' plan a source of optimism for McCoys Creek

By Steve Patterson
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People have big plans for McCoys Creek. There's the plan to clean up lead-contaminated incinerator ash. The one to create a greenway for running and biking. The one to, someday, really handle flooding that has regularly closed roads and sometimes damaged homes.

But plans for changing the polluted Jacksonville waterway have been drawn for years

without a big-picture view of how they could fit together and really serve the neighborhood around it.

An answer to that, backers hope, could come from a new plan meant to connect still more places and projects as one package.

Groundwork Jacksonville, a nonprofit focused on public use of neglected land and waterways, signed a contract this month for an outside

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McCoys Creek, passing lazily under the bridge at Stockton Street, is part of the "emerald necklace" of creeks and parks near downtown Jacksonville where Groundwork Jacksonville wants to plan a network of connected trails up to 14 miles long.

Doctor a surprise pick to lead VA

Trump's choice draws concern over thin management record

By Hope Yen and Calvin Woodward
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's selection of his White House doctor to run the massive Department of Veterans Affairs triggered concern Thursday among lawmakers and veterans groups about whether he has the experience to manage an agency paralyzed over Trump's push to expand private care.

Ronny Jackson, a Navy rear admiral entrusted with the health of the past three presidents, is a lifelong physician whose positions on privatizing operations in the second largest federal department and addressing ballooning health care costs are unknown. First named to the top White House post by President Barack Obama, he would be new to running a big bureaucracy if given leadership over a department of 360,000 employees serving 9 million veterans.

In a statement, Trump praised Jackson as "highly trained and qualified." But representatives of veterans aren't sold on the choice, or on Trump's decision a day earlier to fire VA Secretary David Shulkin.

"There is little that we know about Dr. Ronny Jackson's vision and qualifications," said

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PLAN

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group to design a trail plan tying together the core-city creeks and parks that have been called Jacksonville's emerald necklace.

The group handling that work, the Atlanta-based nonprofit PATH Foundation, has spent a quarter-century planning and building a larger trail system in that city, the Atlanta Beltline, that has been credited with sparking redevelopment in tired, neglected neighborhoods.

"It has been a major shot in the arm for parts of Atlanta," Jacksonville Councilwoman Lori Boyer told the city's Waterways Commission this month.

That example has helped build hopes an emerald necklace plan could have lasting benefits for Jacksonville.

"Seeing what PATH has done in Atlanta makes us excited not only about what we're doing but where we're doing it," said Larry Roberts, president of JTC Running, a 1,000-member track club that gave \$50,000 toward Groundwork Jacksonville's trail plan.

Other organizations — the Community Foundation for Northeast Florida and the Local Initiatives Support Corp. — are also underwriting the trail plan, said Kay Ehas, Groundwork Jacksonville's chief executive officer.

A plan for the emerald necklace won't change anything without money to actually build something, but Boyer noted the city had already budgeted millions of dollars for engineering or construction on projects around McCoys Creek, a part of



The King Street bridge over McCoys Creek is one of the bridges planners have recommended raising to stand above a 100-year flood. [FLORIDA TIMES-UNION, FILE PHOTOS]



Flooding like this, from 1996, has been a recurring problem during hard rains for decades.

the necklace that wanders west of downtown and empties into the St. Johns River in Brooklyn.

"We had a bunch of plans that had already been done but they hadn't been coordinated together," Boyer said. "The real effort here is to make sure that they all work together."

Mayor Lenny Curry last year budgeted \$9 million for ash cleanup between this year and 2020, although that cleanup could be done at other places than the creek. Curry also budgeted \$4.75 million for the McCoys

Creek greenway by 2021.

A less-concrete plan, Duval County's "local mitigation strategy" for reducing risks from natural disasters, listed \$20 million in drainage improvements at McCoys Creek as the top need within Jacksonville in 2015, but said the city's utility fund couldn't cover it right then. The plan hasn't been updated since.

Florida's legislature included a tiny downpayment on a McCoys Creek project in the budget it approved this month, allotting \$200,000 to help pay to close McCoys Creek Boulevard east of

Cherokee Street with the idea of turning the road into the greenway.

A project description seeking that money included references to raising two bridges, at Stockton Street and King Street, so they'd stand above the water during 100-year floods. Another bridge over the creek, at Leland Street, would be removed because it, like the others, is unusable when the creek floods and is deteriorating while nature takes its toll.

City parks and public works officials have been talking about steps to keep

the departments' work in sync around the creek, parks employee Brian Burket told Waterways Commission members.

The emerald necklace trail plan would go further, recommending routes for potential trails to connect the necklace seamlessly, maybe eventually stretching 14 miles from San Marco and Riverside to the Shipyards downtown to New Town and through the Eastside and Springfield.

The plan is due in September, Ehas said, and is expected to include details for creation of a "model mile" that can showcase the necklace trail's potential.

She said McCoys Creek would be a likely place where some plan recommendations could be put into use quickly, but said that could depend on getting input and support from people in the neighborhoods the project would affect. A steering committee is planned to include neighborhood people, Ehas said.

Separately, Groundwork Jacksonville and the city are seeking federal money to help pay for creek restoration work to repair damage done to McCoys Creek over many years.

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JEA

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get to the information that we need to make a decision."

"If there's no effort to do that, well then, why are we here?" Brosche said.

The meeting was the fourth session of the special committee since a consultant hired by JEA told City Council in February that the time might be right to put JEA up for sale.

It was the first meeting since the full council voted Tuesday to expand the size from the five members appointed by Brosche into a committee of all 19 council members.

Eighteen council members attended at least some of the four-hour meeting, but by the time it adjourned at around 6 p.m., only eight council members were still there.

The city's public information office did not immediately respond to questions about whether the administration will answer questions from the special committee.

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DOCTOR

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Paul Rieckhoff, founder and CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "Our concern is whether President Trump was more interested in picking a secretary who would be politically loyal rather than someone who can work across the aisle to fix long-standing problems of bureaucratic delay."

Similar doubts were expressed by Veterans of Foreign Wars, which praised Jackson's military background in a statement but pointed to a nominee biography devoid of "any experience working with the VA or with veterans, or managing any organization of size, much less one as multifaceted as the Department of Veterans Affairs." AMVETS echoed such sentiments.

"We look forward to a rigorous confirmation hearing," Rieckhoff said.

Montana Sen. Jon Tester, top Democrat on the panel that will consider the nomination, said he had yet to determine if Jackson "is up to the job."

It's not clear from Jackson's military service record how much, if any, management experience he has. His military assignments did not appear to include supervision over a large department or unit. His Navy biography says he deployed to Iraq with a Marine unit and served as the emergency physician in charge of resuscitative medicine for a trauma platoon.

Jackson joined the White House medical team in 2006 and is perhaps best known for his appearance before the press corps in January, announcing the results of Trump's first physical in a performance that showed he was quick-witted and unfailingly complimentary of Trump.

Marveling at the 71-year-old president's good health, Jackson opined, "It's just the way God made him."

A White House official said Shulkin himself had recommended Jackson for an undersecretary position at the VA in the fall, and Trump ultimately decided he was more comfortable with Jackson than with other top candidates. The official was not authorized to discuss personnel matters and spoke on condition of anonymity.

If confirmed by the Senate, Jackson would face immediate crises, like a multi-billion dollar revamp of electronic medical records now in limbo that members of Congress fear will prove too costly and wasteful, and a budget shortfall in the coming weeks in its private-sector Veterans Choice program.

Trump is seeking an aggressive expansion of the Choice program to make it easier for veterans to see private doctors outside the VA system at government expense, but proposals are stalled in Congress following a failed effort last week.

"We're going to have real choice," Trump said in Ohio. "That's why I made some changes, because I wasn't happy with it."

Jackson's nomination comes as Trump's new Cabinet nominees begin to pile up in the Senate. That is certain to stir weeks of confirmation battles this spring when senators, especially those running for re-election, may prefer to shift focus away from the changes at the White House.

None of the nominees, including the president's new picks for secretary of state and CIA director, is expected to sail to easy confirmation. The GOP-led Senate is narrowly divided 51-49 and Democrats — and some Republicans — are preparing to ask tough questions. Even though Congress has an otherwise slim legislative agenda before campaign season, prolonged confirmation fights could jam up the Senate and influence the election.

Pending Jackson's

confirmation, Robert Wilkie, a former Pentagon undersecretary for personnel and readiness, is serving as the acting head of the VA.

Lawmakers said they needed to learn more about Jackson's record.

Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson of Georgia, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee that will review the nomination, declined to indicate his support. He stressed that he looked forward to "meeting Admiral Jackson and learning more about him." Isakson, a moderate, has expressed skepticism in the past toward nominees who expressed strong views in favor of privatization.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, independent of Vermont and a former chairman of the panel, cautioned that Jackson would not be approved if he supported privatizing the VA. "Our job is to strengthen the VA in order to provide high-quality care to our veterans, not dismember it," he said.

Shulkin, a physician and the lone Obama administration holdover in Trump's Cabinet, was unceremoniously fired late Wednesday by Trump in a tweet. Shulkin had enjoyed support from Trump for much of his first year in the

administration but support eroded last month after a bruising ethics scandal and political infighting at VA.

Dan Caldwell, executive director of the conservative Concerned Veterans for America, said the group is keeping an "open mind" about Jackson's nomination. Some of the names that had been in circulation for the post had previous ties to the group, which supports giving veterans greater access to private doctors outside the VA system.



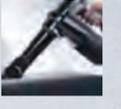
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